

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE WILLIAM J. PERRY
REMARKS TO MARINE CORPS SERGEANTS MAJOR
ARLINGTON, VA
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Secretary Perry: ...It's a real pleasure to meet the cream of the crop in the Marine Corps. I've been looking forward to this session ever since I talked to Sergeant Major Overstreet (inaudible).

As he indicated, (inaudible) is a mission which I have been assuming since I've been in the job--getting out with the troops, understanding what their issues, [are] what their problems are, seeing if we can organize our activities to try and deal with these problems, to deal with them effectively.

I'm going out to each of our CINCs and many of our bases. Some of these times I'm doing it with the senior enlisted service, as Sergeant Major Overstreet indicated. Sometimes, I go on my own. But always, I take some time out to have a breakfast meeting or a luncheon meeting with the senior enlisted at that base to get their feedback firsthand of what the issues are and what the problems are. Usually it's the most interesting and informative part of my trip.

So this is a very important subject for me--getting the direct feedback from the people who actually do the work in our military services.

If I tried to line out for you the three major issues which I think are going to affect quality and the readiness of our military forces in the years ahead, [they would be] first of all, maintaining quality people; secondly, it's maintaining the quality of the leadership that we have; and third, it's maintaining the quality of the training.

As I go around from base to base and talk with the different people at these bases, those are the three factors I'm trying to get a handle on--quality of people, quality of personnel, quality of leadership, and quality of the training.

Let's talk about the quality of the personnel. We have--it sounds like a cheerleading statement, but it's very serious and very effective--the best people and military forces that we've ever had and the most capable military force this world has ever seen. People in the armed services today are smart, hard working, and committed. Therefore, the legacy which I inherited as Secretary of Defense is one that I want to maintain. I don't have to create the quality of people--all I have to do is sustain them. That's not going to be easy. I'll talk about some of the difficulties we face.

We have a real quality of life issue. Everywhere I go, I get different indications with regard to quality of life. Some of them are associated with compensation, some associated with inadequate base housing, some associated with personnel tempo. Personnel tempo hits some units much harder than others. In some units, it's a very big problem.

We owe it to our forces to provide a reasonable personnel tempo. If we can't do that, it will be reflected in our inability to retain people, retain our best people, [and] keep them in the service.

The pressures on the budget and the pressures on mission needs are both moving in the opposite direction. One of the most difficult problems that I have, General Shali has, and the leadership of the Marines has, is trying to resist those pressures and maintain an adequate personnel tempo.

When I leave this symposium today I'm going to go down to meet the INCHON which has just come back from Haiti with the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit. The reason I'm going down there is because I'm concerned with the personnel tempo. The story is very simple, probably most of you are familiar with it. We had the INCHON on its regular six-month cruise in the Mediterranean and [it] went down to Somalia for evacuation operations there--to assist in the evacuation in Somalia--as a full six-month mission. [They] returned to their home base and two weeks after they got back to their home base, we had the requirement to prepare for a potential evacuation out of Haiti. We looked around at what the best resource was, and everybody said the best resource--the most capable, the most ready--was the 24th Marine Expeditionary. So they were put back on the ship after two weeks and sent down to Haiti.

I want to talk about that a little bit. Why did we do that and what are we going to do about it?

It was sent because they were in a high state of readiness. Out of all the units that were available--after six-months of working together--they were a tightly knit, highly (inaudible) team, so we reached in and grabbed them and sent them down to Haiti. This was not made without a very serious discussion. Indeed, that issue was bounced right up to General Shalikashvili and myself, and we spent a whole morning at one of our morning meetings debating whether we could do that. Anytime we break one of our op tempo rules it gets kicked up to a very high level.

We decided we needed to do it anyway, but we did decide a limit. The INCHON tour was to be less than 60 days. Indeed, they're now back at their home base from a less than 60-day tour.

Admiral Boorda and the Chief Petty Officer of the Navy, John Hagan, went down to the INCHON while it was in Haiti last month. They went down and learned the extent to which this redeployment was affecting morale. They conducted a very (inaudible) report. They said the morale was high and that they believed that the redeployment was going to work out well. I'm going down today to meet with them as they return--to have a first hand assessment of that as well.

This is an issue we take seriously. We're not always able to accommodate per tempo objectives we've set out. But when we don't, when we break those rules, we do not do it lightly.

The second issue is the quality of leadership. The Marines have, in my judgment, first quality leadership today starting with General Mundy. And certainly it's represented right in this room today. Leadership of the NCOs in the Marines is (inaudible) anywhere in the world. The poem (inaudible) by Rudyard Kipling, says, "The backbone of the Army is the non-commissioned man," and that's also true of the backbone of the Marines.

I've told a few of you a very interesting story--a story that happened to me a number of months ago when General Nikolayev who was Chief of Staff of the Russian Army came to visit. We took him around to Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine bases all over the country. When he came back to Washington, he briefed me about his trip, and he ended up by saying that he thought that the United States military was the finest military in the world. They have fine equipment and fine officers. He said what gave them the competitive edge is that they've got the best NCO's that I've seen anywhere in the world. There is no other army--no other military force anywhere in the world--with the quality of the NCOs in the U.S. military.

I think he was making a correct judgment. I base that not only on working with the NCOs in U.S. military forces, but I've also been around and visited quite a

few (inaudible) military facilities. Nowhere do you find a professional force--the strength and discipline, training, skills--than is found in our NCOs.

The third area I wanted to mention is quality of training. The importance here, is not only in training to learn how to work adequately with the very sophisticated equipment we have as in combat, but also for safety. Both the competitive edge in combat and safety training (inaudible). All of our operations require good judgment, fast reactions, [and] great skill.

Last week, I was down to the Special Operations Center at Hurlburt Air Force Base. We went out on a night mission from 8:00 p.m. one evening to 2:00 a.m. in gunships, C-130s, and C-13 reconnaissance aircraft, and (inaudible) helicopter. We conducted simulated combat missions, firing at tanks on the ground, [and] doing reconnaissance operations. All of this was done on a moonless night, no lights anywhere--taking off, landing--simulating an airport takeover. If you ever wanted to get an impression of the importance of training, the complexity, and the skill required to conduct these operations satisfactorily, review a night operation like that, and it all comes home to you.

We have, again, tremendous pressures on the budget, and these pressures can push down on training dollars. I will pledge to you that I will resist those pressures. Whatever size our armed forces are, they're going to be adequately trained and they're going to be adequately ready.

Training is the essence of readiness--teaching the skills that our military forces have today. Even in peacetime, training is the key to maintaining safety in the operations.

We've had two bad accidents that got quite a lot of public attention this year--the Iraqi shootdown, the helicopter shootdown over Iraq; and the incident at Pope Air Force Base. That's caused us to look very carefully into accidents and whether there's some slack-off in training or discipline that may be causing it. The good news is that on a statistical basis, we are actually showing a decreasing trend in accidents. We looked specifically at accidents associated with air operations. For the last ten years, there's been a gradual downward trend in those. Today they're running about half the level that they were ten years ago.

Quality people, quality leadership, quality training. That's what I'm putting my focus and my emphasis on. That's what I ask you to put your focus and your emphasis on.

With those introductory comments, between now and the time I head down to meet the INCHON, I'd like to throw the floor open for questions and discussion.

Q: Although you're standing here addressing members of the world's finest fighting organization--that being the United States Marines--my question is on behalf of all the men and women of all the armed forces--soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines--it's about the military conversation that you spoke of and maintaining the quality personnel.

We've repeatedly (inaudible). We have fought and died for maintaining our freedoms and our liberty that we as Americans (inaudible). Then we go to save money (inaudible). I'm just wondering what your philosophy is about the ARGs, and (inaudible).

A: Let me direct (inaudible) as possible. The decisions which I have in front of me each year on compensation and many different facets of it--the most visible and most direct--have to do with salary. In the last two years, we had a situation which I was not comfortable with. The Administration, the press, the Congress were (inaudible) two percent less than inflation. Now fortunately, the Congress overturned that request and gave us (inaudible)

This year--which will be the first budget with my own personal imprint on it--we're going in with a budget that will have a pay raise, (inaudible) inflation, and (inaudible) approved by the President and by the Congress.

This isn't a big deal, it's only a two percent (inaudible), but (inaudible). ...to hold your own. And it has some symbolic significance, too. (Inaudible) ...beyond pay. Fringe benefits, (inaudible). I will work to defend each of those areas. Health care. Each one of them is a difficult problem, but in each one of them I can tell you with certainty that I will work on the part of defense (inaudible). I do not think it's in the cards to have a major incremental increase in pay. I think it's not in the foreseeable future. But I do believe we will be able to maintain (inaudible).

Q: My question is really service-wide and not just Marine Corps-wide. In Camp LeJeune we have 40,000-plus Marines, 55,000 dependents, another 50,000-plus retirees within a radius of about 50 miles. (Inaudible) also Fort Bragg and any other bases. There's talk of closing down the college as far as the (inaudible) is concerned for doctors that we are getting through the federal government system. But we're also losing our doctors left and right to the private sector because of the money they can get compared to what we are paying them. We've got to have some help here. We're losing pediatricians for our care of dependent children. We have the other folks--we don't have any--we don't have the psychologists or psychiatrists. Our health care is coming more and more into the private sector because we have to use CHAMPUS.

Is there something that can be done in order to keep the doctors that we have and keep the health care at least at status quo, if not be able to build it farther? Don't let it drop any farther than it already is.

A: We have a pretty good system of bringing high quality doctors into the military today. Basically, the government pays for their education, in return for which they sign up to give so many years of service. Some of those at the end of that committed service will sign up for longer. It's been a pretty good deal, though.

When we looked at closing down the Defense Department medical school, we looked very closely at the quality of the doctors we were getting out (inaudible) versus the quality of the ones coming in from private medical schools. We couldn't see any difference. We're getting top notch doctors. On the average, they don't stay long. That's a problem. But we have had no shortage of high quality applicants and high quality graduates of the program. So, everything I see in this indicates we're going to continue to get top quality doctors. If we need to pick up the recruiting in that program, we can do that. So far, we're getting more applicants than the program can handle. I think we're in good shape on that program. It's a very attractive program for a kid that wants to go to medical school--to have somebody pick up the bill for that is a very expensive operation. Doctors (inaudible) accumulate such a debt in school that it takes them years in private practice to pay off that debt. It's a pretty attractive proposition for a young person.

Q: You've commented on quality of life, not only today, but in other conversations. We know that the most precious resource is people. I think in order to get the quality of the individual that we need, we have to get them in the pipeline. Getting them to the pipeline not only for us in the Marine Corps, but for the other services. Numerous times I go out and watch recruiting meetings, talk to recruiters, talk to educators and parents, and those interested in what we do, and their comments are, "We didn't know you were still hiring people to come into the service because of the drawdown and everything else." So (inaudible) that we are... We need quality individuals, but we need to have a vehicle to go out and let them know that we are still seeking those individuals. That's in advertising. We know we don't have all the money to produce enough advertising (inaudible). ...PSA announcements only go (inaudible).

So my question is, what are we going to do as a government to try to educate the Americans that we are still hiring and that we need to have quality individuals in the services?

A: That's a good question. We're going to spend more money on recruiting. We're going to spend more money on high visibility (inaudible) -- Super Bowl games (inaudible).

The one question I have to throw back to you is--our recruiting has been service-specific and our advertising has been service-specific... Is that the right way

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to do it, or are we better off getting the word across (inaudible) that the military services are looking for quality people?

Q: As a Marine, sir, I think it would... (Laughter) We do have other services in here, and I don't want to be selfish, but... Whatever we need to have, sir, whatever monies we need to increase our advertisement, I'm quite sure you'll divvy it up to all the services. But the Marine Corps thinks we need more money.

A: We will definitely put more money into advertising. The controversy [is] in Congress, some elements of Congress think we're spending too much on recruiting. I think the U.S. Congress (inaudible). We are requesting (inaudible).

It's great to talk to you all.

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